

OCALI | Podcast – Episode 16

Gabby's Team: A Multiagency Approach to Transition

SIMON BUEHRER: Welcome to Inspiring Change from OCALI. Our forum of stories and connections from our ongoing work of inspiring change and promoting access for people with disabilities. I'm Simon Buehrer.

[DRUMBEAT BEGINS]

If you don't know Ohio geography, Bucyrus is a small city in the north central part of the state. From Mansfield, it's about a 30-minute drive west. From Toledo, about an hour and a half to the southeast. Give or take. Gabby Kozinski graduated from Bucyrus High School in Bucyrus, Ohio in the spring of 2020. Like millions of other students across the country, she's getting ready to go to college this fall.

It's a weird time for all of this, of course, because of COVID. Gabby finished out her high school career with online schooling, and she's going to start college online, too. Of course, any major life transition like this, moving from high school to college, is always going to involve some changes and challenges as well as new avenues and opportunities.

We caught up with Gabby over the summer and asked her to reflect on her school career so far and talk about the next steps in her journey. We also talked to the group of professionals who teamed up to support Gabby along the way. A multiagency approach to transition doesn't always happen, so we wanted to learn more about what the team did, what they learned, and what they're planning to do next.

OK. So welcome, everyone. Let's go ahead and, can you please tell us your name and who you are. And Gabby, let's start with you.

GABBY KOZINSKI: I am Gabby Kozinski. I just graduated high school. I will be starting college in fall. And I like to be on my phone and be outside.

ELAINE KITHCART: I am Elaine Kithcart. I am a service and support administrator from Crawford County Board of DD. Actually, the transition is what I specialize in. And I'm Gabby's SSA.

AUDREY MUELLER: I'm Audrey Mueller. I'm with Opportunities for Ohioans with Disabilities. I am a vocational rehabilitation counselor. I have only started working with Gabby within the last couple of months. I provide supports through the Employment First partnership, which is a contract with the Department of Developmental Disabilities.

AMY VANVOORHIS: I'm Amy VanVoorhis. And I'm an intervention specialist with Bucyrus City Schools. And Gabby was on my caseload, so I wrote her IEP.

TAMMY GWIRTZ: I'm Tammy Gwartz. I'm an intervention specialist, multiple disabilities, cross categorical teacher at the Bucyrus High School. I was at the elementary, and I had the pleasure of meeting Gabby in the elementary school. And then we reconnected back in high school.

JANELL PARKER: I'm Janell Parker. I'm the physical therapist for Bucyrus City Schools. So I've been in Bucyrus for the last 4 years. So I've gotten to know Gabby throughout her high school years.

SIMON BUEHRER: OK. Just a quick timeout for a summary and recap. Gabby Kozinski is a recent high school graduate from Bucyrus High School. Amy VanVoorhis and Tammy Gwartz are both intervention specialists for Bucyrus City Schools. Janell Parker is the physical therapist for Bucyrus City Schools. We were also introduced to Elaine Kithcart, a service and support administrator for Crawford County Board of Developmental Disabilities.

And Audrey Mueller is a vocational rehabilitation counselor for Opportunities for Ohioans with Disabilities. There are a lot of people and voices in this episode. So we just want to try to keep them all straight. Amy, Tammy, Janelle, Elaine, and Audrey made up Gabby's transition team. Although, Audrey had only started working with Gabby in recent months after a colleague who had previously worked with Gabby took a different position. OK. So hopefully we got that straight. Or straight enough.

Let's continue the conversation and get to know more about Gabby.

Gabby, take us back to when you were a younger Gabby. And who did you want to be? What did you want to do when you became an adult?

GABBY KOZINSKI: So when I was younger, at first I wanted to be a doctor. But then I outgrew that. And then ever since then, I've wanted to be an elementary teacher. And I've stuck with that throughout my years.

SIMON BUEHRER: An elementary school teacher?

GABBY KOZINSKI: Yes.

SIMON BUEHRER: What were some of your favorite classes?

GABBY KOZINSKI: I love English. And then my second favorite class was Home Ec.

SIMON BUEHRER: Did you have any difficulties or particular challenges in school? And were there any teachers that helped you, or administrators?

GABBY KOZINSKI: So I only have use of my right arm. My other arm does not work. So I have always had a scribe who writes stuff down. I can do some writing, but most of it, someone has to help me with, because you would not be able to read my handwriting. And then I do have trouble with math. So I do get extra help there in that area.

SIMON BUEHRER: Yeah. What kinds of things would you do? What help would you get?

GABBY KOZINSKI: I've always struggled with math, because I'm not the greatest at it. I eventually got the hang of it with extra help, because that is my weakest spot when it comes to education. But I would always have a calculator, always have a scribe. And then my teachers were always willing to help me whenever I needed help.

SIMON BUEHRER: What would you say were some of your highlights in high school, Gabby? Or some of your accomplishments?

GABBY KOZINSKI: Throughout my high school career, whatever you want to call it, I have mostly maintained a good GPA and have been on the honor roll all four years of high school. And that is something dear to me that I care about my grades, because I like to make my parents proud.

SIMON BUEHRER: That's awesome. So when you were in high school-- can you talk a little bit about when you started your career planning or working on your career goals? Do you remember what that was like?

GABBY KOZINSKI: I want to say we started freshman year. I don't exactly remember what it was like, but I want to say we started freshman year.

SIMON BUEHRER: And were you working towards, at that point, becoming a teacher? Or moving in a direction that would allow you to become a teacher?

GABBY KOZINSKI: Yes. I have always worked towards that goal for quite some time now. But it has always been that goal, yes.

SIMON BUEHRER: That's great. Amy, can you can you talk a little bit or shed a little bit of light on the career planning process, the transition process for Gabby?

AMY VANVOORHIS: Well, I wanted to know, Gabby, did you have the career class when you came over in middle school? A career exploration?

GABBY KOZINSKI: Yeah.

AMY VANVOORHIS: OK. So they started with that.

SIMON BUEHRER: And that was in middle school, Amy? You said middle school?

AMY VANVOORHIS: Yeah. They did have a career exploration. And then Gabby went to Pioneer her junior year.

GABBY KOZINSKI: Well, part of it.

AMY VANVOORHIS: Yeah, part of it. And part it--

SIMON BUEHRER: What's Pioneer? What's that?

AMY VANVOORHIS: That's the career technology center. But that just was not-- you just didn't like that, did you Gabby?

GABBY KOZINSKI: No.

AMY VANVOORHIS: You missed--

GABBY KOZINSKI: I liked my lab. I did not like the other part of it.

AMY VANVOORHIS: Right. So she came back. And that's when that's when I got to meet-- well, I had met Gabby before. But I got to actually get to know her. And now, that the career, I would say, your career--

GABBY KOZINSKI: Capstone project.

AMY VANVOORHIS: Right. Capstone project. And she had to have hours for that. So she's she went over-- was able to go over to the elementary to work with the after school program.

GABBY KOZINSKI: I loved it.

AMY VANVOORHIS: Yeah, that was great. And as far as the other career, I'm thinking about that for the transition. She'd already connected. By the time I helped Gabby at her junior year, she'd already connected with the OOD and the Board of Developmental Disabilities. And that's what I feel-- I feel they were instrumental in helping her determine her desired career paths.

SIMON BUEHRER: Elaine, could you talk a little bit about how the county board got involved?

ELAINE KITHCART: Gabby was not getting services for a while from the county board. When she came back was about a year-- probably what, Gabby, a year and a half ago--

GABBY KOZINSKI: Yeah.

ELAINE KITHCART: --when I first started working, going on two years pretty soon.

SIMON BUEHRER: So that was mid-- partway through your junior year when this started?

ELAINE KITHCART: Yeah. So I think that's really when we heavily got into that transition phase with her. It was a little bit later, at least when I got involved. And I know that she had some experience prior with OOD, because I do know that she did one summer of summer work experience where she actually worked at the county board. Do you remember that, Gabby?

GABBY KOZINSKI: Yeah. I answered phone calls and everything.

ELAINE KITHCART: You weren't working with me yet, but I remember seeing you there. You were answering phones. So I know that she did at least one year with doing the summer work

experience. And then at that point when I picked up with her, was when I really started connecting more with OOD. And we started really working as a team, probably the beginning of her senior year. I would say that's when we really got heavy into really working as a team.

We had, what, probably four or five meetings during the school year?

AMY VANVOORHIS: That was my recollection when I was looking, yes.

ELAINE KITHCART: Which was really very helpful. That doesn't always take place, truthfully, as far as transition. And we really came together in those meetings with Gabby to try to-- one example, I could say, was her capstone project. At that point, when we first started looking at that, we weren't even sure that she had everything ready for graduation. I reached out to her school counselor to find out, make sure, because that's when we first started talking about college.

That's when we really started working. Our goal was to make sure that Gabby was-- this was really what she wanted to do. So allowing her to work with elementary age kids gave her, also, a little bit of something she could put on a resume also.

AMY VANVOORHIS: Those meetings, I think, were crucial. You can email back and forth, but having those in-person meetings-- and they really initiated them, said, let's do this. So I arranged a room. And I really feel that was key and everybody getting on the same page, and like Elaine said, with the capstone and working together.

SIMON BUEHRER: So the meetings were held at the high school. Is that correct?

AMY VANVOORHIS: Yes. Yes.

SIMON BUEHRER: And then, how frequently? You said four to five meetings. But were those once a month or once every few weeks?

AMY VANVOORHIS: It just depended, didn't it Elaine?

ELAINE KITHCART: I would say, sometimes they were quarterly. As we got nearer graduation, we might meet even twice a month. It depends on what we were trying to finalize for Gabby.

SIMON BUEHRER: Gabby, can you tell us a little bit about your capstone project. We've mentioned it a couple of times.

GABBY KOZINSKI: So for my capstone project, I did around after school programs, because like I have previously mentioned, I wanted to go into the elementary field. And it would give me the experience to work with little kids and gain the knowledge of what I would have to do in the future.

SIMON BUEHRER: The kids haven't... you haven't changed your mind, once you actually started doing it.

GABBY KOZINSKI: No!

SIMON BUEHRER: No, OK. That's really great. So for some of the rest of you, I just wanted to talk specifically about your roles and what you have contributed, specifically towards the transition process, and maybe hear from some folks who haven't spoken yet. So Audrey, could you talk a little bit about, just in general, how you typically help with the transition process for students at the high school level?

AUDREY MUELLER: OOD provides the services out as early as the age of 14. In general, our goal is to help with the exploration, with learning how to advocate for yourself to get to your job goal. Also, to help with the needed support to gain that success wherever they're going. So with transition students, that's the career exploration while they're working through their school programs. In the summer, offering them more experience opportunities, as Elaine said, to help build their resume.

Those transferable skills are big. As they get closer to graduation, if we can help direct some of those work experiences in an area that helps to, one, encourage somebody like Gabby to be able to say, yes, this is definitely the area we want to go in. And it helps to finalize that job goal, then that's definitely what we try to do as they get older.

However, sometimes it's just a matter of focusing on those transferable skills, which might be being to work on time, working with co-workers, things along those lines. We also do help them find a temporary job in the interim, in order for them to be able to continue to build those transferable skills, as well as make money to be able to save up for, if college is the goal, then to save up for when they go to college, to be able to pay for some of the bills that might be associated with college.

SIMON BUEHRER: Janell, you have a unique role as a physical therapist. And I think, maybe for some people, they may not typically think of a physical therapist being part of the transition process. But could you talk a little bit about what you've done in working with Gabby? And help us understand more how PT relates to her transition?

JANELL PARKER: For Gabby specifically, her mobility throughout her community and school environments, educational environments, is crucial. It is a critical piece for her. And we've had our share of wheelchair issues. And she-- [LAUGHING] whether she's stranded on the bus and can't get off, or at 6:45, whatever time in the morning that is that I get those crazy calls. Or something is just not running right, or she's stuck in a classroom somewhere and can't get from point A to point B in the building.

Gabby and her teachers and support staff would reach out to me, and I'd try to run over to the high school and help problem solve. So her power wheelchair is her lifeline. And I've just been more of a resource for getting wheelchair repairs and getting things lined up when they need to be done. Gabby has such an independent personality, and she has a drive and high motivation to be independent.

I wanted to make sure, as she graduated, that she knew, number one, who to call when these things happen in the future, to set that up where she knows where she can go to get that help, knowing who her wheelchair provider is and who the repairman is that can come out to help her when these things happen. And also, through this transition process, we've been working on getting with Elaine and Audrey, working as a team to try to get Gabby a new wheelchair.

Her wheelchair is kind of wearing out, so she's in need of a new one. And so we've been working through that process together as a team. So I think that's been pretty critical. Just basically, because Gabby's power wheelchair is her lifeline. It's her ability to access transportation. To get from-- to places in her community, to get to her education, her secondary education that she's going to begin, and then to get, eventually, into her career path. And so just teaching her how to be independent with knowing where to turn and who to turn to when things happen.

SIMON BUEHRER: That's great. So not just being that resource, but also helping direct her as she moves forward with her life, too.

JANELL PARKER: Yeah. I feel like through the transition, my job has just been to educate, not only Gabby, but the team too. I know I've shared a lot of information with Elaine and Audrey both, about these are the things-- because I can't do everything for her. Gabby needs to be able to do these things for herself now, now that she's an adult and independent and through high school. And they are the supporters now that can help guide her with that process when she just doesn't know where to turn.

SIMON BUEHRER: Yeah. No, that's great. Were there any like, aha moments, or just moments where-- and all of you have different areas of expertise. But in coming together for these four or five meetings, did it help shift your perspective at all? Or did you learn anything new?

TAMMY GWIRTZ: I just came up to the high school four years ago. And I didn't know these agencies existed. So I learned a lot from them. They've guided me. They've directed me. They've helped me get Gabby started. And then V helped finish it, Amy VanVoorhis, sorry. So I mean, it was a team effort. But I didn't know it all existed either until-- I don't know how-- I just stumbled about it one day, I think. And it was like, we need to get these kids started as soon as we can, and mentioned it at the IEP meetings, and get the referrals to the families, and see where it takes us.

AMY VANVOORHIS: It's a sense of relief. I have a specific job within this team. To have a team and to have the other people, that's awesome, because it's daunting to think of all of it yourself. Don't you think, Tammy?

TAMMY GWIRTZ: Yeah, that's right. It's a big relief to be able to go to somebody and say, you know, what can we do? How do we help her get here? It's not only in school, it's connecting out of school with other agencies that I still don't know about. I'm still learning. There's more out there.

AMY VANVOORHIS: But it's just the fact of, you have one person or two people on your team versus six. It's just going to be better.

TAMMY GWIRTZ: Yeah, I don't know if you and I could have got where we are today, Amy, with just the two of us.

AMY VANVOORHIS: No.

SIMON BUEHRER: Yeah, so there's strength in numbers it sounds like. Would you have any advice or suggestions for school districts around the state that haven't gone to this team model?

AMY VANVOORHIS: The earlier you can start, the better, and getting the parents on board with it, too.

TAMMY GWIRTZ: Sometimes, the parents aren't on board right away. And it may take a year for them to say, oh yeah, we really do need this. So don't give up after the first year. The more information we can get out to the families about the agencies, the better. It's about the students, too. It's just not about the parents. The students got to buy into it too.

AUDREY MUELLER: I will tell you, as an employment first counselor that sees the students once they've graduated from high school and are looking at their careers in the future that may not involve school, where we've missed the boat with some of them, is they haven't gotten involved early on. Or they haven't gotten to do that career exploration. They haven't gotten that work experience.

So they're coming out of high school going, I don't know what I want to do. They've done the career exploration and then they realize, that's not what I want to do. It takes more schooling than what I actually have the abilities to do. So getting them involved early is definitely a positive.

ELAINE KITHCART: I think the key part, that what we've learned is, starting young, first of all, and getting involved in, and I know Tammy's had me in, and it's a good example with some of some of the younger kids during the IEP meetings that the parents are agreeable to that, to do the presentations along with OOD. And really, what we've found, is that parents really have no idea what is really out there for them.

They have no idea. They have no idea what it's going to take or what's really going to happen after that child graduates from high school. If you have a child that has profound developmental disabilities, most parents just seem to think their child is going to go right into a dayhab. And that's not the case any longer with the Employment First Initiative. They have several steps they have to go through before that can even happen.

So it is an understanding of explaining this in a manner that the families and the parents can really see the value. I think, for me now, as the county board here has really, in the last year, built a really good program with our collaboration now, with all the school districts being

involved in the support team meetings and networking. This is an example of what should happen with every child. And that's what my goal is.

So this whole new process of starting young, doing step by step. I do transition assessments besides their regular transition plans and backward planning, so that I can now present, to the school districts, and OOD if they would like that, starting with their adult goals. And we go backwards. So we can identify what they're missing while they're still in high school.

What I would love to see going forward, is that we really start another group in the county with teachers, a representative from OOD, where we meet at least quarterly, so that we can identify and have a representative from, maybe, each school district, one from OOD, one from the county board. So we can identify all these areas that we're missing, how to form and work better as a team going forward, so that our goal can be we have successes like this with every child.

AMY VANVOORHIS: It seems like a safety net, to me, when I was listening. Just to make sure that nobody falls through the cracks, just to have everybody working together like that.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

SIMON BUEHRER: Amy VanVoorhis is an intervention specialist for Bucyrus City Schools. She was joined by her Bucyrus city schools colleagues, Tammy Gwartz, who is also an intervention specialist, and Janell Parker, a physical therapist. We also heard from Elaine Kithcart, a service and support administrator for Crawford County Board of Developmental Disabilities, and Audrey Mueller, a vocational rehabilitation counselor for Opportunities for Ohioans with Disabilities. Together, they form the transition team for Gabby Kozinski, a recent high school graduate from Bucyrus High School.

Gabby's heading off to college at North Central State College as she continues her journey towards becoming an elementary school teacher. Good luck, Gabby.

Thanks to Gabby, Amy, Tammy, Janell, Elaine, and Audrey, for their time, and for sharing this transition story with us. We look forward to catching up with you soon and seeing how things are going.

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